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ABSTRACT

A child abuse assessment center was created in Dade County, Florida, and was funded by state and local government sources. Staff includes a project director, two clinical social workers, a follow-up case monitor, clerical support, and a psychologist. The center attempts to minimize trauma to the child victim of sexual and physical abuse by a reduction in the number of interviews the child will experience. This is accomplished by center staff interviewing the child in a sensitive environment, videotaping the interview, and by inter-agency coordination. The center assists in developing a sufficient legal case (if appropriate) for prosecutorial purposes by blending investigatory and clinical dimensions in interviewing. The center develops a plan for treatment and follow-up for the child and family as a result of a comprehensive assessment. Useful practices and procedures were found to include the following: (1) despite community support for such a program, the program needs to be carefully planned; (2) before services are provided, agencies should sign co-agreements describing division of responsibilities; (3) in developing protocols, line level input as well as administrative input is necessary for implementation; (4) an advisory board with representatives from the agencies, community, and state is needed; (5) multiple funding sources necessitate clear intent and clearly stated restrictions on the funds; and (6) intra-familial as well as extra-familial abuse should be given balanced consideration. (ABL)

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A CHILD ABUSE ASSESSMENT CENTER: ALTERNATIVE INVESTIGATIVE APPROACHES

PRESENTED AT THE AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, 94th ANNUAL CONVENTION AUGUST 24, 1986 AS PART OF A SYMPOSIUM: INNOVATIVE TREATMENT STRATEGIES AND NEW DIRECTIONS: INCEST VICTIMS AND FAMILIES.

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Douglas S. Hiester

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

WHAT I WANT TO DO TODAY IS TO TELL YOU ABOUT HOW METRO-DADE COUNTY'S CHILD ABUSE ASSESSMENT CENTER BEGAN, WHAT ITS OBJECTIVES HAVE BEEN, WHAT IT HAS ACHIEVED, AND MOST ESPECIALLY, WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED AND CAN PASS ON ABOUT PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTING SUCH A PROGRAM TO SERVE SEXUALLY ABUSED CHILDREN, ESPECIALLY WHEN THERE IS 1) MULTI-AGENCY PARTICIPATION, 2) ENTRENCHED WAYS OF DOING THINGS, 3) DIFFERING EXPECTATIONS, 4) POLITICAL DIMENSIONS, AND 5) A STRONG EMOTIONAL UNDERBASE OF PARENTS OF ABUSED CHILDREN.

NO CREDIT CAN BE CLAIMED FOR THE ORIGINALITY OF THE CONCEPT OF A CHILD ABUSE ASSESSMENT CENTER. BUT THERE WAS UNIQUE APPLICATION IN ADAPTING A COORDINATION MODEL TO MEET THE NEEDS OF METROPOLITAN DADE COUNTY, WHICH IS A MULTI-LINGUAL COUNTY INCLUDING THE CITIES OF MIAMI, MIAMI BEACH AND 24 OTHER MUNICIPALITIES. AND, IF WE INCLUDE THE COUNTY'S UNINCORPORATED AREA, A POPULATION LARGER THAN 17 STATES BEFORE THE INFLUX OF MARIEL AND HAITIAN IMMIGRANTS, WHICH INCREASED DADE'S POPULATION BY APPROXIMATELY 150,000 PERSONS.

CONCERN OVER HOW CHILDREN WERE BEING HANDLED IN THE INVESTIGATION OF ALLEGED CHILD ABUSE CRESTED IN 1984 AS THE RESULT OF A WELL PUBLICIZED LOCAL CASE -- THE COUNTRY WALK CASE IN WHICH MANY CHILDREN PLACED IN A DAY CARE CENTER WERE ABUSED. THE PARENTS OF THESE CHILDREN, WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE STATE ATTORNEY AND STATE LEGISLATORS, LOBBIED FOR FUNDS TO CREATE A SETTING AND PROCEDURES WHICH WOULD BE LESS WRENCHING FOR THE CHILDREN. THE CHILDREN HAD ALREADY BEEN TRAUMATIZED BY THE ABUSE EXPERIENCES AND THE PARENTS WANTED TO ASSURE THAT NO MORE ABUSED CHILDREN WOULD RUN THE RISK OF BEING FURTHER TRAUMATIZED BY THE VERY SYSTEM DESIGNED TO HELP THEM. THEY WERE ANGRY AND FRUSTRATED AND HAD SOME DEFINITE IDEAS ABOUT WHAT THEY WANTED, WHICH INCLUDED VIGOROUS PROSECUTION.

THE SYSTEM THEY WERE REACTING TO RESULTED IN A CHILD BEING REPEATEDLY INTERVIEWED BY DIFFERENT AGENCY STAFF. THIS INCLUDED THE FLORIDA STATE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND REHABILITATIVE (HRS) SERVICES WHICH IS CHARGED WITH IMMEDIATE RESPONSE AND THE PROTECTION OF THE CHILD, LAW ENFORCEMENT WHICH IS CONCERNED WITH CRIMINAL CHARGES AND POSSIBLE PROSECUTION, A RAPE TREATMENT CENTER TO EXAMINE FOR PHYSICAL EVIDENCE, HRS FOLLOW UP BY A DIFFERENT STAFF PERSON, AN INITIAL STATE ATTORNEY FOLLOWING PRE-FILE PROCEDURES...OF COURSE, IF PROSECUTION WAS PURSUED, FURTHER INTERVIEWS WERE CONDUCTED BY A PIT ATTORNEY AND THEN INTO THE CRIMINAL TRIAL PROCESS. AND REGARDLESS OF PROSECUTION, TREATMENT STRATEGIES HAD TO BE DEVELOPED WHICH MEANT FURTHER INTERVIEWS. EACH AGENCY HAD ITS MANDATE, ITS PROCEDURES, ITS PHILOSOPHY AND OBJECTIVES. IT WAS LIKE ROBERT HEINLINE'S SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL J.O.B. WHERE THE WORLD KEEPS CHANGING, WHERE YOU ARE REPEATEDLY UNKNOWN TO EVERYONE AND HAVE TO KEEP STARTING OVER AND OVER AGAIN.

THE PURPOSE OF THE CENTER WAS TO COORDINATE ALL ASPECTS OF THE "SYSTEM" CONCERNED WITH CHILD SEXUAL AND PHYSICAL ABUSE. THESE ASPECTS INCLUDED IDENTIFICATION, INVESTIGATION, PROSECUTION AND TREATMENT/SERVICE PLANNING.

THE DADE COUNTY COMMISSION TOOK THE LEAD IN PARTIALLY FUNDING THE PROGRAM ($148,000), FOLLOWED BY STATE SUPPORT ($100,000), FOLLOWED BY FEDERAL GRANT REJECTION.

STAFF WAS BROUGHT ON AND CONSISTED OF A PROJECT DIRECTOR, TWO CLINICAL SOCIAL WORKERS, A FOLLOW UP CASE MONITOR, CLERICAL SUPPORT, AND A PSYCHOLOGIST WAS RECRUITED.

THE FIRST CHILD AND FAMILY WAS INTERVIEWED IN OCTOBER, 1985.

THE SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES OF THE CENTER ARE:

1. TO MINIMIZE TRAUMA TO THE CHILD VICTIM OF SEXUAL AND PHYSICAL ABUSE BY A REDUCTION IN THE NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS THE CHILD WILL EXPERIENCE

AT THE PRESENT TIME, THE CENTER IS FOCUSED ON THOSE CHILDREN WHO ARE ALLEGED TO HAVE BEEN SEXUALLY ABUSED. PROCEDURES HAVE BEEN DEVELOPED WHEREBY THE CHILD ABUSE ASSESSMENT CENTER (CAAC) IS ADVISED DAILY OF ALL ALLEGATIONS REPORTED TO HRS OF SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN. AN HRS EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAM PRELIMINARILY EVALUATES THE ALLEGATION AND MAKES AN APPOINTMENT FOR A VIDEO TAPED INTERVIEW AT THE CHILD ABUSE ASSESSMENT CENTER. THE VIDEO RECORDING IS AVAILABLE FOR HRS, STATE ATTORNEY'S OFFICE AND LAW ENFORCEMENT STAFF REVIEW.

PROCEDURES HAVE ALSO BEEN DEVELOPED WHEREBY THE STATE ATTORNEY'S OFFICE IS ADVISED DAILY OF CHILDREN SCHEDULED FOR CHILD ABUSE ASSESSMENT CENTER INTERVIEWING. THE STATE ATTORNEY'S OFFICE DETERMINES IF AN INTERVIEW HAS ALREADY BEEN DONE BY CAAC STAFF, ADVISES CAAC DAILY OF CHILDREN SCHEDULED FOR PRE-FILE PROCESSING AND COLLABORATES IN PRE-FILE INTERVIEWING.

FURTHER TRAUMATIZATION OF THE CHILD VICTIM CAN BE THE RESULT NOT ONLY OF THE NUMBER OF RE-TELLINGS OF THE EVENTS AND THE NUMBER OF DIFFERENT PEOPLE TO WHOM THE CHILD RE-TELLS THE EVENTS, BUT ALSO FROM THE NATURE OF THE INTERVIEWING ITSELF. CAAC STAFF CAREFULLY ESTABLISH RAPPORT WITH EACH CHILD AND PROVIDE AN ACCEPTING, CHILD SENSITIVE INTERVIEWING ENVIRONMENT.

2. TO ASSIST IN DEVELOPING A SUFFICIENT LEGAL CASE (IF APPROPRIATE) FOR PROSECUTORIAL PURPOSES

THE HALLMARK OF ACHIEVING THIS OBJECTIVE IS OBTAINING DISCLOSURES WHICH ARE VALID AND RELIABLE. THIS IS A FUNCTION OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF PRECISE EXPERTISE WHICH BLENDS THE INVESTIGATORY/PROSECUTORIAL DIMENSIONS OF INTERVIEWING WITH THE CLINICAL. CAAC STAFF HAVE HAD ON-GOING TRAINING FROM LOCALLY IDENTIFIED PSYCHOLOGISTS EXPERIENCED WITH INTERVIEWING CHILDREN ALLEGED TO HAVE BEEN SEXUALLY ABUSED, AND WITH THE COURT SYSTEM AND COURT TESTIMONY. IN ADDITION, CAAC STAFF PARTICIPATE IN THE PRE-FILE INTERVIEWING CONDUCTED BY THE STATE ATTORNEY'S OFFICE.

3. TO DEVELOP A PLAN FOR TREATMENT AND FOLLOW-UP FOR THE CHILD AND FAMILY AS A RESULT OF A COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT

A REPORT INCLUDING SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS IS COMPLETED ON EACH CHILD AND FAMILY INTERVIEWED. AS OF THIS AUGUST, 150 TREATMENT/SERVICE PLANS HAVE BEEN DEVELOPED. ALSO, ROUTINE FOLLOW-UP CASE MONITORING TO ASSIST FAMILIES WITH RECOMMENDATIONS AND TO RE-ASSESS FAMILY NEEDS IS CONDUCTED BY CAAC STAFF.

OF THE 150 CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES WHO HAVE BEEN INTERVIEWED, SEVENTY-EIGHT PERCENT (78%) WERE FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND REHABILITATIVE SERVICES, AND NINE (9%) FROM THE STATE ATTORNEY'S OFFICE AND LAW ENFORCEMENT. OF THOSE OF WHICH THE NATURE OF THE ABUSE HAS BEEN KNOWN, 76% HAVE BEEN INTRA-FAMILIAL. AS EXPECTED, A GREATER NUMBER OF FEMALES WERE REFERRED (78%) THAN MALES. ETHNICALLY, 26% OF THE CHILDREN INTERVIEWED WERE WHITE, 37% BLACK AND 36% HISPANIC.

EXCLUDING THE CASES IN WHICH THE ALLEGATION HAS BEEN UNFOUNDED, 63% OF THE CHILDREN INTERVIEWED DISCLOSED SEXUAL ABUSE IN A VIDEO TAPING CONDITION.

RECENTLY, THE PROGRAM HAS COME TO MORE VISIBLE LOCAL ATTENTION, AT LEAST AS THE PARTIAL RESULT OF A STRONG BELIEF BY SOME INFLUENTIAL GROUPS AND LEGISLATIVE INTENT THAT PROSECUTION SHOULD BE THE PRIMARY FOCUS OF THE CENTER. THIS WOULD RESULT IN THE SERVICES BEING COORDINATED BY THE STATE ATTORNEY'S OFFICE RATHER THAN A SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES AGENCY.

ALTHOUGH NOT UNIVERSAL TRUTHS, WE HAVE LEARNED CERTAIN PRACTICES AND PROCEDURES THAT MIGHT BE USEFUL TO PASS ON. THEY SEEM VERY OBVIOUS NOW BUT ONLY SO IN HINDSIGHT.

1) IF A COMMUNITY SUPPORTS THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUCH A PROGRAM, IT NEEDS TO BE CAREFULLY PLANNED AND NOT RUSHED INTO BECAUSE OF EMOTIONAL PRESSURE OR POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS.

2) BEFORE SERVICES ARE PROVIDED, THERE SHOULD BE SIGNED CO-AGREEMENTS SPELLING OUT AS PRECISELY AS POSSIBLE WHAT THE OBJECTIVES ARE AND EACH PARTICIPANT'S (STATE ATTORNEY'S OFFICE, LAW ENFORCEMENT, STATE PROTECTIVE AGENCY) PARTICULAR BEHAVIORAL PART.

3) IN DEVELOPING THE PARTICULAR PROTOCOLS TO BE FOLLOWED, THE INPUT AND AGREEMENT OF ADMINISTRATIVE HEADS IS ESSENTIAL, BUT LINE LEVEL INPUT CAN IDENTIFY THE POTENTIAL PROBLEMS AND RESISTANCES THAT CAN BLOCK IMPLEMENTATION.

4) CO-LOCATION FROM THE BEGINNING IS ESSENTIAL IF COLLABORATIVE CASE COORDINATION IS GOING TO BE FACILITATED.

5) AN ADVISORY BOARD SHOULD BE ESTABLISHED AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE AFTER THE CO-AGREEMENTS ARE SECURED, WITH REPRESENTATIVES FROM THE CO-AGREEING PARTIES AND INVESTED COMMUNITY AND STATE PARTICIPANTS.

6) IF THERE ARE MULTIPLE FUNDING SOURCES, THE INTENTS, RESTRICTIONS AND PARTICULAR LEGISLATIVE LANGUAGE ASSOCIATED WITH THAT FUNDING HAS TO BE EXQUISITELY CLEAR AND KNOWN TO ALL FUNDING PARTIES.

7) KEY STAFF SELECTION SHOULD BE BY A PANEL CONSISTING OF AT LEAST REPRESENTATIVES FROM THE CO-AGREEING AGENCIES AND FUNDING SOURCES.

8) UNLESS THE KEY STAFF ARE ALREADY RECOGNIZED AND ACCEPTED AS LEADING PROFESSIONALS, OR ARE NEUTRAL, CARE SHOULD BE TAKEN TO AVOID HIRING STAFF WITH HISTORICAL LINKAGES TO COMPETING OR ADVISARIAL AGENCIES.

9) ALTHOUGH THE MAJORITY OF REFERRALS MAY BE OF ONE PARTICULAR TYPE (INTRA-FAMILIAL VS. EXTRA-FAMILIAL), BALANCED CONSIDERATION THROUGH STAFF INVESTMENT MUST BE GIVEN IN ORDER TO INSURE THAT ALL ELEMENTS IN THE SYSTEM ARE INVOLVED AND NONE FEEL DE-EMPHASIZED.

10) IF STAFF ARE UNFAMILIAR WITH JUVENILE, CIVIL AND CRIMINAL COURT PROCEDURES, IT SHOULD BE UNDERSTOOD THAT THE CREDIBILITY OF AND CONFIDENCE IN THESE STAFF BY PARTICIPATING AGENCIES WILL REQUIRE HIGH VISIBILITY, SYSTEM STEEPING AND THE READY AVAILABILITY OF TRAINING.

IF THE FOCUS OF THE EXISTING PROGRAM MOVES TO EMPHASIZING THE PROSECUTORIAL ASPECT, IT IS FEARED THAT THE MAJORITY OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES REFERRED FOR INTRA-FAMILIAL ABUSE WILL NOT BENEFIT FROM COORDINATED CASE DEVELOPMENT AND TREATMENT PLANNING.

IN OUR WORK WITH ABUSED CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES, BOTH INTRA- AND EXTRA-FAMILIAL, THE NEED FOR CREATIVE AND INNOVATIVE THERAPEUTIC APPROACHES WAS DAILY EVIDENT. THE NEXT SEGMENT OF THE SYMPOSIUM WILL FOCUS ON THAT ASPECT.